

ART VIEW

ART VIEW; Putting a High Gloss on Berlin and Potsdam

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IN EVERY GREAT CITY, THERE ARE small museums and galleries in which we can find, one at a time, sharp-focus scholarly exhibitions. In those small but cogent displays, informational overload plays no part. We leave them renewed and refreshed.

The special exhibitions downstairs at the Frick Collection are an example of this. So are the loan shows at the Drawing Center in SoHo. A new entrant in this category is the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, which has recently opened in an elegant five-story town house, remodeled for the purpose, at 18 West 86th Street in Manhattan. As its name indicates, it is primarily a teaching institution at graduate level, but it also has in hand an exhibition program.

Its founder, Susan Weber Soros, is a graduate of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum/Parsons School of Design, and the dean of the center, Derek E. Ostergard, was until lately on the Cooper-Union staff. Auguries are good, therefore, and they are proved right by the first show, which is called "Along the Royal Road: Berlin and Potsdam in KPM Porcelain and Painting 1815-1848."

That title may not be a grabber. Neither the subject nor the medium is likely to draw lines round the block. But the subtext of the show is one about which I often fantasized during the years when Berlin was a divided city and Potsdam was off limits to western visitors. What I dreamed about was what we can glimpse at this moment at the Bard Center -- a newborn metropolis in which it would be hard to find an ugly building.

We also see an angelic countryside in which unpolluted streams ran through a suburban countryside where everything in sight was both brand new and squeaky clean. It is clear from photographs made this year that after careful restoration that suburban scene has recaptured a little of its pristine quality.

The show (which runs through Feb. 20) consists primarily of porcelain vases, plates and plaques, on each of which is recorded one or more views of Berlin or Potsdam, or both. Equal billing is given to the paintings of Carl Daniel Freydanck, almost all of which are shown beside the pieces of porcelain to which they relate.

The Royal Porcelain Manufactory, or KPM, had three functions. It was there to put a high gloss on the look of the new Berlin. It was also there to provide sumptuous gifts for persons of importance, from Catherine the Great of Russia to the Duke of Wellington and King William IV in England. Finally, it was expected to rival, and if possible to overtake, the

achievements of the long-established and renowned Meissen factory. (A professor of chemistry in Berlin was directed to carry out 30,000 experiments in hopes of cracking the secrets of Meissen.)

For these reasons, many of the vases go all out for grandeur. Their size signals to us and says, "Don't miss this one!" They let fly with deep blues, mauves, voluptuous pinks and a sonorous violet. The handles try hard -- sometimes too hard -- to heighten the general impact. Hefty floral borders set off the inset landscapes and townscapes, and variations are played upon great vases of the past. Virtuosity in porcelain making was valued very highly at that time, and some of the plaques come in a simulated gilt frame that is remarkably well done.

Faced with some of the more elaborate pieces, we should remember that much was demanded of the KPM. It was nothing for its royal owners to send a 1,600-piece place setting to someone they wished to honor. If sometimes the craftsmen tried too hard, and if the comparison with Sevres or Meissen is not often to Berlin's advantage, we can fall back with pleasure on the documentation.

Much of what was documented was owed initially to the architect, painter, stage designer and town planner Karl Friedrich Schinkel. In 1815, at the age of 34, Schinkel became, in effect, Mr. Architecture in Berlin. He could do anything, and do it in a way that was grand but never bombastic, concise but never thin-spirited, and innovative but never cranky.

His palaces, theaters, country houses, academies, churches, Italianate villas, head gardener's houses, cast-iron armchairs and silver teapots -- all were unmistakably his and could have come from no other hand. Not all his town plans were accepted, but to a remarkable degree he got his way.

SUCH WAS THE POWER AND THE individuality of Schinkel's imagination that in the Berlin of his day all other buildings were judged by the standards of his. By the sheer force of his example, he was there, even if he wasn't there.

The trouble with Schinkel was that when it came to painting Berlin, he was so much better at it than anyone else. Carl Emanuel Conrad, with the rotunda of the great Altes Museum, and Wilhelm Barth, with the exterior of the Nikolai Church in Potsdam, got something of Schinkel's high-definition clarity.

But the KPM had on its staff Carl Daniel Freydanck as its in-house view painter. He had an easygoing charm, but he muffed the whole point of the exposed brickwork on the facade of the Werder Church and gave at best a crumbly, tentative impression of the little Charlottenhof in Potsdam, where Schinkel's razor-sharp right angles achieved a small-scale apotheosis. Of the fierce white light of Berlin, there is hardly a trace.

Freydanck was at his best, on the other hand, with the early industrial oddities that were built in the early 1840's. When the Meithe chocolate factory came disguised as a Norman citadel, that caught his fancy. And in 1843, when the New Steam Engine Building in Potsdam came disguised as a Turkish mosque, with a minaret as its chimney, Freydanck really woke up.

In conjunction with this very curious and subtly rewarding exhibition, a three-day symposium on "Prussia in the Age of Biedermeier: Art, Architecture and the Decorative Arts," will begin on Jan. 20. Details are available by calling (212) 721-4245.